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FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE FOR AMERICA

Address to the
Commonwealth Club of California

by
William E. Colby
on

Wednesday, 7 May 1975
in

San Francisco, California

As usual, I am happy to be in San Francisco to renew my enthusiasm for this beautiful Bay Area. But I am happy to be with you for another reason, to discuss with this influential audience the reality of American intelligence today.

One reality, of course, is the degree of attention being focused on American intelligence. A number of critics, joined by a very few ex-employees, are attacking us for a wide variety of alleged and imagined sins. Even the most tangential connection with CIA brings a story from page 7 to page 1 of many of our newspapers. The CIA's activities in the United States are being investigated in depth by a Vice Presidential Commission. Select Committees of the Senate and the House of Representatives have been established to conduct the broadest and most intense investigation ever made of the American intelligence structure.

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The result is that the American public is concerned and confused about American intelligence. Our American public, with its basic good sense, recognizes that it would be dangerous to live without intelligence in a world in which we are thirty minutes away from an aimed and cocked nuclear missile. At the same time, the proliferation of these sensational charges have led this same American public to wonder whether our intelligence service has not become itself a threat to the Republic and its ideals.

This confusion must be clarified. The investigations being made in depth and in detail by the Vice President's Commission and the Select Committees of the Congress will help in this process. But these investigations and deliberations will require time, and in the interim the American public deserves a reply to the more sensational charges made about its intelligence service.

We cannot allow the public's perception of this essential service to be dominated by the missteps, few and far between, which it may have made over its twenty-seven-year history. I have admitted such errors, and we have taken steps to correct them and prevent their recurrence. I have also insisted that our discussion of them must not lead to a hysterical focus on the nits and picks of yesterday to the extent we injure intelligence today and block its improvement to meet the needs of our country in the world of

tomorrow. I believe the old saying of not throwing the baby out with the bath water is very germane to this current situation.

Thus, I welcome this opportunity to contribute what clarification I can to public understanding of the reality of our intelligence today. I do it as an American, conscious of our nation's need for protection and also of our ideals. I also speak as a professional intelligence officer familiar with the changes which have occurred within American intelligence over the years. I believe very firmly that American intelligence can be responsible and accountable to the American people and to its elected representatives, and at the same time maintain those secrets which are essential to its contribution to our country. It is a professional service which must reflect our national principles, but which also has certain attributes inherent in its own nature. Its needs for discipline, secrecy and organizational integrity are no more in conflict with our free society than those of our military and diplomatic services.

First, intelligence has changed. Most of us have grown up with an image of intelligence derived from the experiences of Nathan Hale, Mata Hari, James Bond, and perhaps Maxwell Smart. But this image is no longer valid today. The clipper ships, covered wagons and steam locomotives which brought your forefathers to San Francisco were indeed transportation, but their image hardly reflects modern transportation with its 747's in the sky, tractor-trailers on the interstates, and giant tankers on the sea. Modern intelligence has

changed as much from its old images as modern transportation has from its early exemplars.

The key feature of modern intelligence is that it is an intellectual process. It collects masses of information about the complex and changing world in which we live. Some of this information comes from those open sources which you read in the press, from the comments of American travelers and businessmen dealing with foreign affairs, and from the public statements broadcast by other countries to their own people. To these has been added a great new dimension of intelligence, the collection of information by technology. This now allows us to see, hear, and sometimes even touch information previously totally inaccessible and in quantities hitherto totally unmanageable. The technical genius of Americans, especially many here in the Bay Area, has given us new vantage points from which literally we can look at the world around us and understand the meaning contained in hitherto incomprehensible electronic phenomena. Where it is yet necessary to obtain information essential to us but concealed by a closed society, we may still have to use the old clipper ship of clandestine collection, but it has been streamlined and powered to a new order of productivity. On many occasions, clandestine collection allows us to bridge a gap of years between the initiation of developments in the minds of foreign leaders or in their research laboratories and their appearance on test beds or in diplomatic demarches.

But this mass of information must be analyzed and assessed, and this process too has changed. The computer has become a major tool of intelligence, replacing the trench coat or the cloak. Beyond this, our intelligence doctors and masters of arts and sciences, in a variety of disciplines from agricultural economics to nuclear physics, assess thousands of jigsaw pieces of information and order them into reasoned appreciations and conclusions. This "faculty" of our Intelligence Community would be the envy of any large university.

The very role of intelligence has also changed from the day in which the spy stole a secret, gave it to the General, who won a battle. Today intelligence conclusions about foreign situations and their likely course of development cover the political, the military, the scientific, and the economic fields. The information is of course used to warn us of imminent -- and future -- threats to our country. But it also helps our country to develop its foreign policy on a basis of carefully reasoned knowledge, rather than emotion, ignorance or misunderstanding. A most rewarding contribution is its positive peace-making or peace-keeping role, where it provides the information necessary to agreements to restrain arms buildups among the major powers or to defuse potential combat between two of our friends about to strike blindly at one another through suspicion and error.

A most interesting change in American intelligence is in its customers. The Generals and Admirals still use it, but so do our Presidents, Secretaries, and Ambassadors. Congressional committees and members are regular recipients of its product, and an increasing number of serious journalists and other commentators on the world scene are finding that an hour or two at CIA in an unclassified background discussion of a foreign situation can give balance, objectivity, and accuracy to the conclusions they lay before the public. Thus, American intelligence provides its product to all the participants in American decision-making -- the executive branch, the Congress, the press, scholars and the public at large. Many of our intelligence conclusions can be provided when our sources need not be revealed and where we can be insulated from the political arena, so that our judgments may be independent and objective, not partisan.

Public opinion and our critics might accept this changed reality of American intelligence but still question whether we work under adequate controls and limits. Following the centuries-old tradition abroad that nations conduct but do not discuss intelligence, the laws which in 1947 established today's permanent structure of American intelligence were deliberately phrased in circumlocutions and left broad gray areas.

All this has obviously changed. My presence here today, speaking publicly about intelligence, is only one reflection of the difference between

my job in our country and that of my colleagues in other nations, where my counterparts are not even identified. Last week I participated in the third session this month of intensive questioning by an Appropriations Committee on next year's Intelligence Community budget, and we haven't even gotten to the details of CIA's own request. These requests have been gone over carefully by the Office of Management and Budget and by the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees' staffs and will be the subject of additional hearings and questioning of me and a number of my subordinates. Our regular Congressional oversight committees conduct periodic and detailed hearings, some 26 in 1974 and 13 so far this year. I have undertaken an obligation with them not only to respond completely to their questions but to advise them of matters they might not know to ask about. In addition, both by recent enactment and by Congressional committees' insistence on their jurisdiction, we intelligence professionals appear before a variety of other Congressional committees with respect to specific aspects of our work.

In addition to this regular supervision, we also will be investigated in depth by the Senate and House Select Committees, which will also examine the degree of control and supervision. The Vice President's Commission will report its findings early next month after looking deeply into the adequacy of external and internal controls over our activities. I fully support procedures to ensure supervision, control and accountability with respect to intelligence.

I only plead that these procedures also take into consideration the unique and fragile character of many sensitive intelligence operations.

But what of all the stories of secret political and paramilitary operations? Certainly these will also be investigated, and I am confident that it will be demonstrated that any such activities in past years were conducted under legal authority then existing, reflected the political climate of those times, and were carried out according to properly constituted procedures. As I have said separately, we have very few clandestine operations other than pure intelligence collection these days. This is the result of the changed world in which we live, but I must point out that this changed world seems to be changing again. Our country might again need the capability to provide some quiet influence or assistance to friends abroad without engaging the formal diplomatic or military might of the United States.

Am I merely defending American intelligence today? No. I am asking that it be strengthened. I am asking that its basis of understanding and support among the American people, in the Congress, and with the press, be increased. I am asking that its laws and guidelines be clarified so that we in the intelligence profession are given a clear expression of the mission the American people and Government wish us to undertake. I ask that procedures for supervision, control and decision-making about American intelligence be reviewed and clarified so that each of us -- citizen, representative, official, and

intelligence officer -- share in the responsibility for the conduct of American intelligence along the lines we think proper. I ask that the structure and interrelationships among intelligence and the other agencies and bureaus serving our people be understood and agreed. And I ask that the necessary secrets of intelligence be preserved in the interest of the nation, not just of the intelligence profession. We believe these secrets need better laws, and especially we need to arrive at a consensus that we Americans do have some national family secrets which must be kept. To make an open book of our intelligence sources is to invite steps -- many quite simple -- to deny us information vital to our nation's welfare or safety.

These steps, then, would strengthen this result of American intellect, technology, and dedication called intelligence. Out of this effort to investigate, clarify and strengthen American intelligence this coming year, we can make a great contribution to the profession of intelligence worldwide. We can plainly show that its essential contribution to our nation's safety and the welfare of our citizens can be fully compatible with the ideals and procedures of our free and constitutional American society. With this accomplished, we in the intelligence business can then get back to full-time work following the guidelines adopted and accepted by our people and their representatives.

Thank you very much.